

TomFoliage: Featured Article

Writing on the Dark Side

by Michael Prescott

Okay. Let me say it right up front. I write books about serial killers.

Yes, I throw in the occasional stalker or terrorist for variety. But serial killers are my bread and butter, my stock in trade. And this is a problem, it seems.

It's not a problem for me. It's a problem for other people--people who look at me funny when I announce my occupation, throwing me a suspicious glance that suggests I just might be a serial killer myself. At the very least, I've gotta be sick in the head. What normal person would choose to write about this stuff? Don't you have to be weird or crazy--I mean, even weirder and crazier than the average writer--in order to pursue this topic? After all, it can't be healthy to explore the psychology of twisted murderers on a daily basis.

And what about my readers? They must be real sickos too. Or so many people assume.

For a long time my standard answer to this line of criticism was as follows: A strong villain is necessary to show the virtues of the hero in sharp relief. The more evil the bad guy, the more heroic his adversary. And besides being evil, the bad guy must be scary and dangerous and frighteningly competent. That's where the suspense comes from--putting your hero up against impossible odds.

This answer is not necessarily wrong, but I've come to think that it's superficial. To be honest, it is not strictly necessary to delve into the bad guy's psyche in order to highlight the good guy's positive qualities. Besides, I often find the villains interesting in their own right--sometimes more interesting than the heroes--and the more evil they are, the more they interest me.

I've also come to think that I'm hardly alone in this. In fact, my fascination with the dark side dates back to the beginnings of literature.

Take Homer's *Odyssey*. This epic poem is thought to have been written around 3000 BC. It contains two memorably horrific sequences--the famous scene in the Cyclops' cave, and another scene that is less famous but equally compelling.

When Odysseus and his crew are about to embark from the island of the sea witch Circe, they first make a detour to the mouth of Hades. There they sprinkle a blood offering on the ground, summoning the shades of the dead, who emerge out of the mists as phantoms bearing messages for the captain and his crew.

I imagine that Homer found these ghouls interesting for their own sake, and not simply as a foil to the wily but prosaic Odysseus. And his audience probably felt the same way.

Roughly five hundred years later, the playwright Aeschylus must have relished creating a new image of horror on the Greek stage in his depiction of the Furies that haunt the madman, Orestes. And two thousand years after that, Shakespeare surely delighted in his audience's gasps when the ghost of Hamlet's father, possibly enacted by the Bard himself, strode in full armor across the boards of the Globe theater.

There are countless examples. The urge to send a shiver of atavistic fear through one's audience is as old as imagination itself.

Yet despite its impressive pedigree, people continue to question this basic storytelling impulse, and they often feel there's something unseemly, disturbing, and downright repellent about it. Why?

I think the hint of an answer can be found in two rival systems of modern psychology. Freud dissected the human personality into the superego (conscience), the ego (self), and the id (unconscious). The id represents the dark side--the unlawful, animalistic urges that the more fastidious ego and the conformist superego strive to suppress. Jung, a colleague of Freud's who broke with him, had a more positive view of the unconscious, but he, too, postulated a dark side to every psyche, which he called "the shadow." The shadow comprises those traits that have been ruled out of bounds by the conscious personality but remain alive in the unconscious and come to the surface in dreams.

My feeling is that all of us have an id or a shadow in our souls. We may reject it, deny it, wish it away, but it is there. And because we sense that we aren't quite whole, that we've tried unsuccessfully to excise a part of ourselves, we are drawn to stories that put us in touch with the missing link in our own personalities.

This isn't to say that we're potential killers or crazies, simply that each of us has a small part of ourselves that longs to bay the moon. At odd moments we wish to savor the power of a killer, his freedom from social ties and mores, his ability to settle scores with impunity. We wouldn't act on these fleeting thoughts or feelings, but neither can we exorcise them completely. And so, like audiences in all ages, we're intrigued by any fictional device that sheds light on this darkness. When we shiver, it's because we've momentarily acknowledged a corner of ourselves that we normally keep hidden.

People who read only nonviolent, uplifting fiction are, of course, entitled to their choice. But maybe they ought to be just a little less smug about it. They're locking the door on the dimmer recesses of their own souls. They pretend to have no shadow--but their pretense is hollow. They're kidding themselves.

Do they know it? Maybe, maybe not. I can't say, but I'll tell you one thing for sure.

The shadow knows.

Copyright © 2001 by the author. All rights reserved.